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The *Femme Fatale*: A Literary and Cultural Version of Femicide

Abstract The figure of the *femme fatale* is understood as inviting her own murder. Supposedly, the cause of the violence done by a man in thrall to her, she is in fact the primary victim of this violence. In the French confessional narrative, the woman is always somehow at fault for the protagonist's failure, whether by loving him too little or too much; she dies and he lives to tell the tale, recounting it to another man who listens and absolves. Thus, the heroine both dies again and is revived, to be contained—in both senses—in the text. Fictions from three centuries—Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1753), Mérimée's *Carmen* (1845), and Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902)—will be compared for their representation of literary femicide. Almost a century later, the changed ending of *Fatal Attraction* (directed by Lyne in 1987) demonstrates the public's clamor for the killing of a supposedly dangerous woman. A final section compares the significance of Princess Diana with these fictional instances of femicide: How did our love for her bring on her violent death?

Keywords Blood; Cultural Literacy; Fantasy; *Femme Fatale*; Gypsies/Roma; Princess Diana

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Femicide is a widespread social phenomenon, but it is also a cultural fantasy; arguably, one cannot exist without the other. In a recent article in *Current Sociology*, Weil (2016:2) notes that recent fictions lean on an increased sensitivity and knowledge of femicide "which goes beyond our western familiarity with Othello and Carmen." Yet that familiarity is still with us: one thing Othello and Carmen have in common—and share with the other instances discussed below—is a fantasy that locates what Othello terms "the cause" (Shakespeare 1951:1149) in the woman who dies, rather than the man who kills her. This idea of a sexual danger embodied in the *femme fatale* may, in some ways, appeal to women: either for the glorious empowerment it seems to offer their narcissism (see: Dinnerstein 1977), or for the righteous anger of "good" women against "bad"; but it is essentially a fantasy of self-justification for the male violence that murders on the grounds of "passion." Moreover, this fantasy may—perhaps must—coexist with the knowledge that "she asked for it" or "I couldn't help myself" are no longer acceptable defenses in Western criminal law.

Methodology

My critical position is interdisciplinary, based on a training in comparative literary studies, which now takes its methodological angle from literary-and-cultural studies (see: Segal and Koleva 2014 and http://cleurope.eu/). I read mainly male-authored fictions through feminist and psychoanalytical approaches, analyzing the unconscious fantasies that have shaped them. In the article referred to above, Weil (2016:6) argues that "the study of femicide, whether perpetrated consciously as an act of will or unconsciously or irrationally, falls squarely within the realm of sociology." In literary-and-cultural studies, there is no dividing line between conscious and unconscious motivations: fantasy underlies any action and an act is always the realization of a fiction—though, once again, this in no way diminishes the materiality of the outcome in which one dies and one lives. In this essay, I aim to carry the image of the *femme fatale* through five iterations and show how variously, and at times counter-intuitively, its mislocation of the motive of "passion" operates. Manon, Carmen, Marceline, Alex, and Diana are of course very different women and suffer very different deaths; yet I hope to show that we can think about them all through the same analytic lens.

Odd bedfellows as they may seem, I would situate this essay in the context of two non-literary theorists—Sigmund Freud and Michel de Certeau. From Freud, I take the fundamental assumption that everything is an utterance and no utterance is innocent; thus, the overt or conscious intention of an artifact, system, or action is never more than part—arguably the least interesting part—of the story. Everyday parapraxes are purposeful acts, and

> I fail to see why the wisdom which is the precipitate of ordinary experience of life should be refused its place among the acquisitions of science. The essential character of scientific work derives not from its distinctive objects but from its stricter method of establishing facts and its search for far-reaching correlations. [Freud 1999a:175-176][1]

In a similar way, I suggest, there are no earmarked objects for literary readings, but one can read both texts and other things in a literary way. Freud's (1999b:293) mode of interpretation—of dreams, jokes, slips, or the social imagination—works best by taking what he calls "an irregular path full of twists and turns…like the zig-zag of the solution of a knight's-move problem." Gradually, by this method, he undoes overdetermined knots of meaning, based on the inference that these knots must have been purposefully (unconsciously) knotted up in that way. Literary reading can make use of both his assumptions and his methods.

[1] All translations from French and German are my own, and reference is provided to the original text.

About a hundred years later, Certeau offers a perfect example of how the ideas of literacy can be used on a variety of objects apparently unconnected with direct acts of reading. Thus, he refers to walkers "whose bodies follow the downstrokes and cross-strokes of an urban 'text' which they write but cannot read" (Certeau 1990:141). The walker makes shapes—but far above his or her puny movements, the tourist looking down from on high (Certeau was writing in 1980 from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center) possesses a New York that is a "city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. In it the spectator can read a universe that is taking off into the air" (Certeau 1990:139). The walker writes, the viewer from above reads; one traces and is traceable, Daedalus creating the labyrinth, while the other becomes "a voyeur" or more precisely "a god's eye" (Certeau 1990:140). He concludes: "being nothing but this point of vision is the fiction of knowledge" (Certeau 1990:140). Thus, all knowledge is fiction-making, and to know is to read.

The *Femme Fatale*

This essay, then, is a literary-cultural tour of a number of instances exemplifying a concept of dangerous femininity that has been all too influential. My first two examples, Manon Lescaut and Carmen, are figures as well—perhaps better—known from opera and ballet as from their literary originals, and both sprang from a Romantic masculine fantasy of murder that will never be his fault. My third textual example hides its violence deeper under the supposed weakness of the benighted intellectual and his late discovery of the body that bleeds. My fourth example illustrates how audiences refused to take the side of a *femme fatale* at the center of a 1980s film; and my last follows an adored figure from recent history who, in her life, embodied a popular fantasy in which, perhaps, a violent death was always presaged. What all these figures have in common is the seductiveness—to both sexes?—of the fatal and fated woman whose death is the premise for a fantasy of desire.

The term *femme fatale* is familiar enough—a brief Internet search produces pages of sultry-eyed lovelies from Garbo to Britney Spears, Lauren Bacall to Lolita. They gaze out of a frame both sideways and head-on. Of course, they may feed a narcissistic fantasy in their female viewers, but, more particularly, they license violence to them, by suggesting that the motive has originated in them. Let me begin this tour with a female-authored text, which indirectly exposes the phenomenon at its root. It will not surprise us to discover that the motive does not originate in the victim but in the resentment of a man who happens not to be loved.

The scene is from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1965). The monster is wandering in lonely despair, trying to find his way back to his creator and enemy, Victor Frankenstein. By chance, he meets Victor's young brother William and, goaded by the child's taunts, strangles him. Then he notices a miniature hanging round the boy's neck. The portrait is of Victor and William's mother. Her beauty moves him first to desire, then to a correlative bitterness:

> For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned; I remembered that I was forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright. [Shelley 1965:136]

Enraged, he goes into a barn, where another woman lies asleep:

> I bent over her and whispered, "Awake, fairest, thy lover is near—he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes; my beloved, awake!"
>
> The sleeper stirred; a thrill of terror ran through me. Should she indeed awake, and see me, and curse me, and denounce the murderer? Thus would she assuredly act if her darkened eyes opened and she beheld me. The thought was madness; it stirred the fiend within me—not I, but she, shall suffer; the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her; be hers the punishment! [Shelley 1965:137]

This young woman is Justine and hers is, indeed, the punishment: she is condemned to death for William's murder, and Frankenstein, who realizes what must have happened, believes (rightly) that he is guilty of both deaths, both miscarriages of justice.

I want to examine the psychological mechanism revealed in this episode, the curse laid upon the blameless woman condemned for a crime she has not committed, but which a man has perpetrated because he believes she will not love him. She dies indirectly, but this is femicide nevertheless, in a mediate form. The key point is the line: "the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone." I shall explore three literary cases of this motive, and in all of them, directly or indirectly, the murder for which the guiltless woman is condemned is perpetrated against her.

The concept of the *femme fatale* is a Romantic one, born out of the hugely influential art movement of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century. Some—for example, Goethe (in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* 1795-1796) and Nietzsche (in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* 1872)—would argue that Romanticism began with the figure of Hamlet, for whom "conscience does make cowards of us all" (Shakespeare 1951:1047), on the grounds that a person, especially a young person, who thinks too much will never act. The feebleness of the Romantic hero is one reason why the harm he does is re-read as sensitivity or susceptibility, not least to frustrated desire.

Little more than a century after Shakespeare, the Abbé Prévost created Des Grieux, the narrator-protagonist of *Manon Lescaut*, another brilliant youngster, who has—so we are told—wasted his life chasing after a flighty minx unworthy of his abiding passion. Manon is the first of a series of "bad" women in French *récits* (see: Segal 1986; 1988) whom immature young men fall in love with and for whose sake—again, so the text argues—they abandon promising careers in the church, army, or politics. This protagonist's life is the subject of the story he tells to an older man who listens eagerly (as we do) and either sympathizes or condemns him—occasionally both.

The lost life at issue is that of the young man; yet, actually, he does not lose his life: the woman does. She dies and he tells the tale. She dies, I will argue, so that he can tell the tale. In other words, much of the most important modern literature is based on a case of femicide, and comes into being precisely on the grounds of that death.[2]

According to Wikipedia,

> A ***femme fatale*** is a stock character of a mysterious and seductive woman whose charms ensnare her lovers, often leading them into compromising, dangerous, and deadly situations…Her ability to entrance and hypnotise her victim with a spell was in the earliest stories seen as being literally supernatural; hence, the femme fatale today is still often described as having a power akin to an enchantress, seductress, vampire, witch, or demon, having power over men. [Wikipedia *Femme fatale*]

In this "stock" view, the woman is dangerous, wily, deceitful—but what motivates her? It is meant to remain mysterious, no doubt, but mysterious for whose benefit?

In Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1970), the panoply of nasties, to cite his chapter headings—The beauty of the Medusa, The metamorphoses of Satan, *La belle dame sans merci*, Byzantium, Swinburne, and "le vice anglais"—stand in the shadow of the grand-daddy of them all, the marquis de Sade. *His* Justine is another innocent caught in the snare of others' wickedness. It is precisely her innocence that feeds a masculine fantasy of danger and violence.

Manon Lescaut (1753)

My first fiction is *Manon Lescaut* (1753). Like the other two literary fictions I shall discuss, it has a central first-person narrative in which a young man tells his story to a frame-narrator, who presents it. Des Grieux, a 17-year-old theology student, takes one look at a girl a few years older "and much more experienced" (Prévost 1995:20) than him, and abandons his studies, his religion, his friends, family, and apparent principles, to follow her wherever she may go. First, they run off to Paris, "defrauding the rights of the church" (Prévost 1995:25), but with a vague intention of marrying, and when the money runs out, without telling Des Grieux, Manon calls in his older brother to take him home to his father.

This is the first of a series of what Des Grieux will call "betrayals," but it is possible to read Manon's life-choices differently since, as often as she leaves him, she also comes back to him, and it is she, not he, who understands the practicalities of life. He is no more honest than she, and it is only ever he who breaks the law—he abducts her from prison, killing a guard, he makes money by card-sharping, and on more than one occasion he lies his way into the assistance of his devout but besotted friend, Tiberge. These criminal acts are all justified in his (and maybe our) eyes by being committed in the name of his one morality: keeping Manon by his side.

As for Manon, in a rare passage in direct voice (a letter she leaves for him when joining another rich lover), she justifies her actions thus:

> I swear to you, my dear Chevalier, that you are the idol of my heart, and the only one in all the world that I could love as I love you; but don't you see, my poor darling, that in the state we have been reduced to, fidelity is a silly virtue? Do you think one can be truly loving when one has nothing to eat? Hunger would cause me to make some fatal mistake: one day I would breathe out my last, thinking I was uttering a sigh of love. I adore you, believe me, but for a while you must leave the management of our affairs to me. Woe betide whoever falls into my clutches! I am working to make my Chevalier rich and happy. My brother will let you know how your Manon is, and tell you how she wept at having to leave you. [Prévost 1995:68-69]

Whether or not we believe what Manon says here—Des Grieux certainly does not, and his attachment grows ever more bitter, but nonetheless strong for that, maybe stronger—it can surely be understood as a different "economy" of love from his. For her, it seems, the co-presence of the body is less essential than what she later calls, in similar tones, "the fidelity of the heart" (Prévost 1995:147).

What is the outcome? Manon is punished for what are largely Des Grieux's crimes, on the grounds that if he—a talented young man of high birth—committed them for love of her, then that is clearly her fault. She is a classic *femme fatale*, in other words.

Manon is condemned to be deported to the new French colonies in America. Des Grieux refuses to let go and follows her there. Once again, this is perceived as the most touching devotion, rather than as an addiction: he will support her in her exile. Yet this is not what happens. Once in New Orleans, they tell the colonial Governor they are married. All goes well for a while, even though the Governor's nephew, Synnelet, is in love with Manon. However, Des Grieux then decides he is ready to marry Manon for real and confesses the lie to the Governor who, naturally, unimpressed by this belated honesty, promises Manon to Synnelet. Des Grieux kills his rival, he and Manon run away, and, once in the desert, an uncharacteristically feeble Manon does indeed breathe out her last.

This is how Des Grieux buries his beloved:

> For more than twenty-four hours I remained prostrate, my mouth pressed to the face and hands of my dearest Manon. My intention was to die there, but at the beginning of the second day, I realized that this would leave her body exposed, after my death, to being devoured by wild beasts. So I resolved to bury her and wait for death on her grave…I broke my sword, to use it for digging, but my own hands were of more service. I dug a wide grave and there I laid the idol of my heart, after having wrapped her in all my clothes, so that the sand would not touch her. I did not place her there until I had kissed her again a thousand times, with all the ardor of the most perfect love. I sat down again close by her and gazed at her for a long time. I could not bring myself to close up the grave. At last, my strength beginning to fail, and fearful that it might run out altogether before I had completed my undertaking, I buried in the bosom of the earth the most perfect and beloved thing it ever bore. Then I lay

[2] The death of the beloved woman is similarly a universal premise of the novel of adultery, the key genre of European realism: see Segal 1992.

> down on the grave, my face turned to the sand and, closing my eyes with the intention of never opening them again, I invoked the aid of Heaven and waited impatiently for death. [Prévost 1995:200]

So upset that he cannot speak, Des Grieux is almost a zombie; in other words, he borrows her state of death (for a time). Then, he is rescued by Tiberge and later by the frame-narrator, to whom he tells this affecting story a few years later. In narrating to these men (and to us), Des Grieux absolves himself both of his crimes and perhaps of his love of Manon; he is exculpated and can return to respectable society. She, on the other hand, is exposed and effectively reinterred in his story. His version of their two motives is the only one that can, henceforth, be known.

Carmen (1845)

Something very similar happens to Carmen, the equally lively, wayward heroine of Prosper Mérimée's (1980) novel. Like the frame-narrator of *Manon Lescaut*, the frame-narrator of this short novel meets the protagonist twice, before and after the woman's death, and also has a brief chance to meet Carmen. He is struck by her powerful presence, big black eyes, and air of being "'Moorish, or…'—I stopped, not daring to say 'a Jewess'" (Mérimée 1980:54). "She laughs: 'Oh come! Can't you see I'm a gypsy! Would you like me to tell your *baji* [fortune]? Have you ever heard of La Carmencita? That's me!'" (Mérimée 1980:54).

We next meet Don José when he is awaiting execution for having killed Carmen. He too tells the frame-narrator his life-story. Born in the Spanish Basque country, of highborn stock and a keen player of *pelota*, he kills an opponent and has to escape to the army. After a short time he is "led astray" by the brilliantly seductive Carmen, who persuades him to set her free after he has arrested her for attacking a fellow cigarette-girl; a skilled mimic, she tells him she is from his country, but

> She was lying, *monsieur,* she did nothing but lie. I don't know if that girl ever spoke a word of truth in her life; but when she spoke I believed her: I just couldn't help it. She was mangling the Basque language, yet I believed she was from Navarra; her very eyes and mouth and coloring proved she was a gypsy. I was crazy, I didn't know what I was doing…It was like being drunk. [Mérimée 1980:68]

So, we have here another addict whose attachment is based as much on hatred as anything we might call love; he calls it madness. He despises her for the very qualities—her independence, her skill with languages, her knowledge, and leadership—that he admires in her and knows are lacking in him. Carmen promises him love (as her *minchorrò*) and even a gypsy marriage (as her *rom*), but not for ever. Don José joins her bandit gang and takes active part under her command in what he calls their "ugly trade" (Mérimée 1980:96). But soon:

> "Do you know," she said, "since you've been my *rom* for real I don't love you as much as when you were my *minchorrò*. I don't want to be harassed and above all I don't want anyone telling me what to do. I want to be free and do what I like. Beware of pushing me too far; if you get on my nerves I'll find myself some nice lad who'll do to you what you did to the One-Eyed Man" [her husband, whom Don José has killed]. [Mérimée 1980:95]

Yet, despite this independence, Carmen is made (in supposedly traditional *roma* fashion) to foretell, and thus seemingly invite, her death at Don José's hands. In response to his threats, she says:

> "I've always thought you would kill me. The very first time I saw you I had just met a priest at the door of my house. And tonight, as we were going out of Cordova, didn't you see? A hare ran across the road between your horse's feet. It is written." [Mérimée 1980:99]

Written is, of course, exactly what it is. And this is how she dies, and how Don José's narrative ends. They ride together to "a lonely gorge" (Mérimée 1980:102). The act of femicide is worth reading in detail.

> "Is this the place?" she said.
> And with one spring she was on the ground. She took off her mantilla, threw it at her feet and stood motionless with her hand on her hip, gazing at me.
> "You want to kill me, I can see that," she said. "It is written. But you won't make me give in."
> I said to her: "I beg you, be reasonable. Listen to me: the past is all forgotten. Yet you know it's you who have ruined me: it's for your sake that I became a robber and murderer. Carmen, my Carmen! Let me save you, and save myself with you."
> "José," she answered, "you are asking the impossible. I don't love you anymore; you still love me, and that's why you want to kill me. I could go on lying to you, but I can't be bothered. It's all over between us. You are my *rom*, and you have the right to kill your *romi*, but Carmen will always be free. A *calli* she was born, and a *calli* she'll die."
> "You love Lucas [the toreador], then?" I asked.
> "Yes, I loved him—as I loved you—for a while—less than I loved you, perhaps. But now I don't love anything, and I hate myself for having loved you." [Mérimée 1980:102]

Don José weeps and begs her to relent. She refuses to change her mind and throws away a ring he has given her. "I struck her twice. It was the One-Eyed Man's knife, which I had taken because I had broken my own. She fell at the second blow without a cry. It's as if I can still see her great black eye staring at me. Then it grew dim and closed." [Mérimée 1980:102]

Like Des Grieux, he cannot leave her:

> For an hour or more I remained beside the corpse, exhausted. Then I remembered that Carmen had often told me she would like to lie buried in a wood. I dug a grave for her with my knife and laid her in it. I searched a long time for her ring, and found it at last. I put it in the grave beside her, together with a little cross. Perhaps I was wrong. Then I mounted my horse, galloped to Cordova, and went to the nearest guardhouse, where I made myself known. I told them I had killed Carmen, but I would not say where her body was...Poor child! It's the *Calle* who are to blame for having brought her up like that. [Mérimée 1980:103]

With these words of self-exculpation, the internal narrative closes. Now, this famous death-scene is generally read as the proof of Carmen's resistance, her refusal to let herself be loved, the explanation

for—indeed justification of—her murder. The last sentence above blames her *roma* inheritance (*femmes fatales* are of course often "dark ladies from the other side" and Carmen's baleful dark eye repeatedly stands metonymically for her foreignness) for all that has happened. But, once again, we can see that the violence is entirely on the man's side, though the narrative does everything possible to argue the reverse.

Before going on to my third text, I would like to gather together the main points that emerge from my first two, classic *femme fatale* texts. What do they have in common? Both the heroes, young men who tell their story to a willing male listener, have failed in life. Each passionately loves a woman who, seemingly, does not love him. Why does Manon die? Because Des Grieux insists on following her to America. Why does Carmen die? Because Don José will not let her go. Both men watch their beloved die and then bury her. After this, they remain semi-lifeless (prostrate, exhausted), as if imitating her state. Until they have told the story—disinterring and reinterring her in words—they are like zombies. Telling the story against her allows them to live again.

L'Immoraliste (1902)

My third text is André Gide's (2009) *L'Immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*). On the surface, it looks quite different from the other two: the woman is far from a *femme fatale*. But, once again, she dies in a dramatic climax and a pool of blood, and, once again, it is a matter of misplaced desire and two wasted lives, of which only the woman's is violently ended. The book opens, like the others, with a frame. The frame-narrator, with a small group of friends, has been summoned by Michel to a village in Algeria where he is stranded, lacking the strength to return to France. Michel tells his story, and this story ends with the death of his wife Marceline.

Everything in *L'Immoraliste*—implicitly, but never explicitly—suggests that Michel is gay, as his author was; but he never acts upon his implied desires. When both the bright-eyed boys of Algeria and the charismatic Ménalque beckon him to other acts and other lives, he is fascinated, but never follows. One critic alone noticed this and wrote to Gide, just after publication: "the husband is a pathetic lunatic whose very vices are half-hearted, a sadist and pederast in vain…Michel moves about in an unknown world without desires…Your hero has just one fault that makes him uncongenial to me: that is his total lack of immorality" (letter from Francis Jammes, June 1902 as cited in Gide 1958:1515). And yet, every review you will find of the book asserts, as the title implies, that Michel is a self-indulgent "immoralist." As the Amazon blurb has it: "One of Gide's best-known works, *The Immoralist*, concerns the unhappy consequences of amoral hedonism, telling the story of a man who travels through Europe and North Africa and attempts to transcend the limitations of conventional morality."

What creates the impression that Michel is radical, hedonistic, or immoral? Simply the fact that, every time he *almost* commits an act of betrayal, his wife bleeds—finally, to death. Blood is part of an implicit hydraulics of exchange in this novel. What one has (it seems), the other must lack. We have already seen this in the inability of both Manon and Des Grieux, Carmen and Don José, to be powerful or criminal at the same time. In *L'Immoraliste*, this works by a process of draining. Familiarly, blood may be gendered "good"/masculine or "bad"/feminine but never both; and where it denotes illness it may flow from Michel or Marceline, but not both at once (for the metaphorics of blood, see: Segal 1992). The Arab boys have bright, healthy blood: one cuts his thumb while carving wood and laughs in pleasure at the gash of red, but when Michel spits a "huge grotesque [affreux—this word recurs at key moments of bleeding, as we shall see] clot of blood" (Gide 2009:607), it is the sign of the tuberculosis that almost kills him. Later, when his wife is pregnant, Michel arrives home from an evening visit to Ménalque, to find Marceline surrounded by bloody medical instruments, having suffered a violent miscarriage.

Thus, after a few hours spent just talking with the potential corruptor, we find the signs of a temptation Michel has neither admitted nor espoused etched on the body of his wife. The evidence of this weird bargain—that she must suffer both for his wish to betray her and for his failure to do so—has gone right back to the opening of their story, where the narrative set up a reciprocal exchange between them.

A studious boy brought up by his professor father, Michel is married off at the latter's deathbed; Marceline is someone he has known all his life and yet "I knew my wife very little" (Gide 2009:598). He discovers that he is rich and Marceline is poor, that he is delicate while she is healthy. These differences will be the coinage of their exchange as they, like stupidity, become something not to be shared, but to be shared out between men and women: "We began to talk. Her charming remarks delighted me. I had formed, as best I might, a few ideas about the silliness of women. Beside her, that evening, it was I who appeared to myself awkward and stupid" (Gide 2009:601).

Like the supposed hydraulic exchange of qualities, the plot of the book is highly symmetrical: after their honeymoon in North Africa, they travel through Italy to Normandy, then to Paris; and then take the same route in reverse—Paris, Normandy, Italy, and again North Africa—as, following her miscarriage, Marceline somehow contracts TB in her turn. The places that aided Michel's recovery are deadly for her: she grows weak, making him feel strong. And, just like our other two heroes, Michel clings to the wife he apparently does not love, dragging her to the place of his desire. Why? Because without her decline he has no "evidence" of the proud immoralist he now believes himself to be.

Both Ménalque and the Arab boys represent a kind of power and desire that Michel does not have. Earlier in the story, he watched, fascinated, as the boldest of the boys, Moktir, stole a pair of Marceline's scissors. Now, back in Biskra, she is extremely unwell. He rediscovers Moktir—still gorgeous, though all the other boys have grown out of their attractiveness. The last night proceeds thus. After staying beside his wife till nightfall, weary of "the superhuman effort," his eyes "drawn horribly [*affreusement*] to the black holes of her nostrils" (Gide 2009:687-88),[3]

[3] On the theme of the "black vortex," see: Segal 1988: on *Carmen*, 42-43 and 51; on Fromentin's *Dominique*: 149, on *L'Immoraliste*: 151, and on "Men's mirror and women's voice," 202-223.

Michel slips out and follows Moktir to a café where his mistress leads Michel to a low bed and at last: "I let myself go to her as one lets oneself sink into sleep…" (Gide 2009:688 [ellipses Gide's]). Thus, passively, still not responsible for his acts, the protagonist commits a limited adultery—not with the desired Moktir, but only with his mistress.

Of course, he rushes home to find the room awash with blood and Marceline's hideous eyes gazing at him in uncanny silence. He searches her face to find somewhere "to place a dreadful [*affreux*] kiss" (Gide 2009:689). She dies after losing her faith, dropping her rosary, and only hours later: "towards early morning, another vomiting of blood…" (Gide 2009:689 [ellipses Gide's]). And that is the end of Marceline and, with her, of Michel's narrative. However, before he finally stops speaking, he makes two revealing remarks. First, familiarly, he expresses his incapacity to act for himself following the death of the woman: "Take me away from here; I can't do it by myself. Something in my will is broken" (Gide 2009:690).[4] And then he utters the curious observation: "At times I am afraid that what I have suppressed will take revenge" (Gide 2009:690).

What exactly has Michel (or indeed Gide) destroyed or suppressed from the text that might take its revenge on them? The answer brings us back to my reading of the *femme fatale* and, indeed, our overall theme of femicide. If Marceline just goes inexorably downhill, dies a "natural death," why is there so much blood? Because, essentially, she has been murdered by Michel's failure to be three things: firstly, what he thinks he is—actively immoral; secondly, what he will not admit he is (or what the author chooses not to make him)—actively homosexual; and finally, and most significantly here—dependent for his idea of freedom, independence, desire, on the presence and destruction of the woman.

Is this love? Is it desire? It is hard to say, in any of these cases. Des Grieux certainly appears to love Manon passionately. Don José, whether he loves her or not, desires Carmen beyond reason, and way beyond her wish. Michel seems to cling to Marceline, despite his failure to love or desire her. What these three young men have in common is that they cannot separate from their women and hound them to a femicidal death, which leads *them* through a temporary state of disempowerment to a new life as narrators, reinserted into the world of the patriarchy.

Fatal Attraction (1987)

I want to move sideways now to another fiction, the movie *Fatal Attraction* (directed by Adrian Lyne in 1987),[5] as popular as *Manon Lescaut* and *Carmen* in their day, and which gave English a new term for the *femme fatale*: "bunny-boiler." However, it generally escapes the notice of viewers that Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) never attacks any human beings apart from herself. All the active violence in the film is perpetrated by the male protagonist, Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas). Yet the film is addressed to, and focused upon, the experience of an adulterous man who, it is implied, gets out of his depth and deserves a second chance at a good marriage.

This balance of power is nowhere better exemplified than in the film's closing scene. Dan has been allowed home by his wife Beth (Anne Archer), bruised both emotionally by his betrayal and physically after she crashed the car, believing Alex was a danger to their daughter. Throughout the film a number of references to *Madame Butterfly* in the earlier lives of Alex and Dan have suggested the damage that unloving fathers may do their children, and of course the shock of women abandoned by men. This has offered viewers a way both to see the difference between Butterfly's sublime (traditional, feminine) passivity and Alex's (modern, unfeminine) refusal to "be ignored," and to detect an undertow in which Butterfly's agony and thus, implicitly, her trajectory is mirrored in Alex's.

The original ending—still featured in the DVD extras—was a suicide à la *Madame Butterfly* which, although the mechanics were crude, appeared to show an elegant Alex sitting cross-legged in a white dress cutting her throat. This scene is cited visually in the following exchange.

> **AL:** The way the ending was originally in the screenplay was that he got the blame…for something he didn't do. She killed herself, she committed suicide, and that was the end of the movie.
>
> **SJ:** When we shot the picture, we all liked the ending—the original ending.
>
> **NM:** The ending I wrote for *Fatal Attraction*, the *Madame Butterfly* ending, was the ending that was filmed.
>
> **SJ:** It was intelligent, it was risky, and the way Adrian shot it was brilliant. But the audience was unsatisfied.
>
> **MD:** What happened is nobody could anticipate the anger that the audience had for the character that Glenn portrayed so brilliantly.
>
> **SJ:** We tested the picture in Seattle, in San Francisco and twice in Los Angeles, and you could have put a postage stamp over the reactions of the audience.
>
> **AA:** As they began to test the movie, it became apparent that audiences were really uncomfortable and unsatisfied.
>
> **SL:** The audience was on the edge of their seat, and then you would come to a certain place, and you could just feel that they weren't satisfied.
>
> **AL:** The ending just felt flat. It felt like the movie was working terrifically, you know, up until the last quarter of an hour.
>
> **SJ:** And in every one of the screenings, when Anne picks the phone up and says, "If you ever come near my family again, I'll kill you, you understand?" the audience erupted. And you knew they wanted some... revenge.
>
> **SL:** By then we knew that the audience wanted Anne Archer to defend her family, we knew that they wanted Glenn Close to die, we knew all of these things...

Both the production team and, especially, Glenn Close preferred the original ending. As Close puts it:

> I thought it was a joke, when they came to me—when Stanley called me and said, "We're going to reshoot

[4] You do not have to be a vulgar Freudian to note the same epithet, "broken," used of Des Grieux's sword, Don José's knife, and Michel's will.

[5] Quotations from *Fatal Attraction* are retrieved from the DVD of 1987. Characters are listed by their first name, and other speakers are abbreviated as follows: AA = Anne Archer; AL = Adrian Lyne (director); GC = Glenn Close; MD = Michael Douglas; NM = Nicholas Meyer (screenwriter); SL = Sherry Lansing (producer); SJ = Stanley Jaffe (producer).

> the ending." Because for me, for all the research I'd done, that's how that character would end and that's how a lot of characters like that end: they're self-destructive and they kill themselves, whereas the way the new ending portrayed her character was as "a one-note, sort of knife-wielding villain."

Finally, she was over-ridden and gave in.

> **AA:** Adrian made no bones about it that the new ending he wanted to use was in the style and the genre of the French film *Diaboliques*.
>
> **AL:** And listen, there's probably many better endings than we came up with, but this was an ending that was sort of operatic... [Special features: "Forever fatal"]

"Sort of operatic" is a fascinating conclusion. The ending which was finally chosen—surely more *grand guignol* than high art—is precisely the one that the *Madame Butterfly* thematic had not implied. Even if far from high tech, the original ending was, as the make-up artist Richard Dean notes elsewhere in the features, both picturesque and beautiful; elegance and blood have now been replaced by a furious resurrection from an artificially deepened bath, and a "clean" shot from a righteous woman. This is the revenge of virtue against vice, as represented by the two traditional female types, virgin and whore, *maman* and *putain*, fairy godmother and wicked stepmother. What was brought together in sublime tart-with-a-heart, Cio Cio San, and remains potential in transgressive Alex, falls apart again in the violence of woman against woman that was the preferred ending.

Although it is Beth who kills Alex, that is only after Dan has horribly drowned her; the uncanny of the *femme fatale* is enacted by her terrifying rise from the watery depths, like the "one-note" monster she has been made to appear. If this conclusion seems to change femicide into a woman-on-woman murder, it is only, I suggest, because the audiences of Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles felt compelled to forgive the male protagonist both his treachery and his violence, by displacing both characteristics onto his victim.

Princess Diana (1961-1997)

And what of the real-life case of Princess Diana? Let me begin by declaring that I am *not* going to suggest her early and sudden death was a case of femicide—as defined and understood by this project—except in the eyes of the conspiracy theorists whose contributions on the web (see: Wikipedia Diana conspiracy) constitute the main, lasting echo of those heady days of shock, almost twenty years ago. I want instead to examine how she functioned as a *femme fatale*, magnetizing the fantasies of those who adored and, arguably, sacrificed her. Some deaths are, of course, genuinely accidental. However, Diana in the Paris underpass, Alex in the bath, Marceline in an Algerian hotel, Carmen in the "lonely gorge," and Manon in the Louisiana desert are perhaps less different than they appear on the surface. Each was brought to a place where something seemingly inevitable happened through a combination of circumstances in which blame circulates.

Diana lived and died at the point of extreme visibility and her death provoked, at least in the UK, a rare example of promiscuous grief played out in the same visible mode. What was the actual process of her ability to represent in this way "the unusually multi-faceted reflector of a fragmented and fractious time" (Unsigned Editorial 1997:25)? I have argued elsewhere that the *motif* of radiance, ubiquitous in the media in the week after Diana's death, can be connected structurally to her presiding condition of bulimia. For both are circuits traced around, into and out of, the surface-point of the skin. It is not greed, in any normal sense, that motivates binge-eating, but the drive to circulate food without possessing it. Rather than consumption, this seems to be a fascination with repeatedly rehearsing consumption without being its slave. The slavery of bulimia, unlike the different slavery of anorexia, is reproductive of itself; for this reason, if for no other, it is feminine. The bulimic of either sex is repeating the pattern that relegates women to reproductive, rather than productive work; but it is not work, in that it has no end-product; the body disguises its self-disgust in a "normalizing" treadmill of giving and taking.

Radiance, surprisingly perhaps, works in a very similar way. It too is a circular system in which what comes out has first been put in. Only our gaze makes her look radiant. She was, as Martin Amis (1997:53) put it, "a mirror, not a lamp." Rilke (1965:4) describes this exactly in the second Duino Elegy, when he likens angels to mirrors that "draw their own streamed-forth beauty back into their own countenance." No doubt, this was because, bizarrely it seemed, the only person who did not love her was her husband: the large circuit of celebrity substituted for the ideal small circuit of intimacy.

If Diana seemed to present to us "the dazzling surface of our accumulated desires" (Gerrard 1997:23), it is surely because she stood, in a very specific way, at the meeting-point of Foucault's (1975) two representations of the relation of power to the gaze in *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*). Here, he describes the people looking up to the monarch: "Traditionally, power was what was seen, shown and manifested…Up to this point it had been the role of political ceremony to be the occasion for the excessive yet regulated manifestation of power" (Foucault 1975:219-220). At such moments, royalty was on display and the people were allowed to look, not on the face of power, certainly not into its eyes, but at a proper distance and logically from below. Genet's (1956) *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*) satirizes this relation of mass to icon when the denizens of his brothel present themselves as the Queen, the Judge, the Bishop, and the General, on the balcony that marks the liminal point between two worlds. The balcony and the media screen are such transmitting skins, dual-sided in their function of presenting and protecting. We gazed up and, by a certain distortion (because she was actually taller than Prince Charles), we saw her gazing up too.

Diana, in fact, came to embody the dual verticality of power. Power is vertical, firstly, as we have just seen, because the few are on display to the many. Typically, in feudal regimes (of which the British monarchy is a late version, writ small), rituals and ceremonies ensured that those with power and privilege become known to their public by an "ascending" individualization. Over the last two centuries, on the other hand, the downward gaze of a punitive surveillance or discipline individualizes

the common man or woman "by comparative measures referring to the 'norm' rather than by genealogies using ancestors as reference points; by 'gaps' rather than deeds" (Foucault 1975:226).

It is in this sense that Princess Diana was, as endless accounts from all quarters marvel, "one of us." And yet we also—as we discovered with contrition after she died—wanted to see her displayed, and thus wanted the discipline by which *paparazzi* pursued her, hounded her out of doors and forced her indoors, with the threat of "face rape," "hosing her down," "whacking her," or "blitzing her" (see: Alter 1997:41; MacDonald 1997:18; the first term is Diana's own, the others are photographers'). Diana was a double-facing skin between the feudal and modern modes of the exercise of power. This was most particularly her function for women. She could be adored, but also pitied, because whatever misfortunes we think we have endured by virtue of our sex she seemed to have experienced, too. We looked simultaneously up and down, as she did. Our lives and fantasies (including our ambivalent longing to be gazed upon) were embodied in her. And, logically, we must have wished for her death at the hands of those who made her visible to us.

Thus, we reach the logical conclusion of the Diana phenomenon and the way in which we loved collectively in the 1980s and 1990s, and perhaps still do. The immortality or virtuality of the object is already anticipated in life by the intense feelings generated by someone whom we do not know—and the underlying assumption that those who ought to love her will never do it as well as we do. This, my fifth example, seems to take the murderous attitude of the *femme fatale* to its furthest distance from *Othello* or *Carmen*. Yet it also exemplifies the way in which the supposed love-object, glowing at first with charm and beauty, is finally wished dead by the very individual, or crowd, who cannot bear her strengths.

Conclusion

I hope I have shown how my literary cases exemplify a cultural phenomenon, demonstrating versions of femicide. In *Manon Lescaut* and *Carmen*, we have instances of the *femme fatale* whom the male protagonist blames for her own destruction. In *L'Immoraliste*, too, he can, he feels, only be strong if she is weakened to death—but, as in the first two texts, it turns out that her death deprives him of everything. These fictions disguise their femicidal motives in the poignancy of a young man's life ultimately saved; yet this relies on the blaming of a victim guilty of not loving in exactly the way he wanted her to. In Alex Forrest, Dan discovers the power of desire and has to destroy it to recover his social and familial "virtue." As for Diana, she was the object of a collective love based on the exposure of a failed intimacy and a seductive combination of glamour and humiliation. Unlike the literary texts, in which apparent circularity covers a deadly unilateral impulse, her story was indeed one of circulation—her need, our need, her comfort, our comfort—turning upon the reflective screen of her skin. Her death is also a clear case of fatality—and yet, if it was a femicidal murder, the responsibility for it, like the modern-day version of love that it represents, cannot be located, it can only be mislocated.

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